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ABSTRACT

Suggestions are made for working toward five requirements for a competent foreign policy for the United States. These requirements for competency in the foreign service are a thoughtful knowledge of history, which would improve our intolerance of ambiguity; factual and linguistic knowledge; the ability to define terms and ask the right questions; the understanding that policy is more than pronouncements and that resources must be marshalled to attain stated objectives; and an affirmative disposition which recognizes that while the United States may never be perfect, the world is a better place with us than without us. Four areas of concern must be approached in order to achieve these objectives. First, we need substantial changes in teacher education and a review of formal requirements established by our public school systems and colleges and universities. Second, community-based institutions and organizations for continuing education should be reviewed and possibly restructured. Serious efforts are required to bring individuals from diverse backgrounds together for courses of reading and discussion. Third, a major effort must be made to convince the media that foreign news is of interest to Americans. The final effort calls for lobbying local, state, and federal governments for a change in matriculation and graduation requirements, teacher certification, and effective budget support. (Author/KC)

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"Assuring the Future: A Diplomat's Concerns"

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Before the conference on
Improving American Competence in World Affairs:
An Agenda For Action

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Joseph D. O'Connell Jr.

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I do not believe it overly dramatic to say that you, and similar groups of concerned individuals and organizations in other cities, are engaged in a task of historic importance. In any discussion of our foreign policy, as in any discussion of the state of our economy and our defenses, the issue is ultimately that of our ability to survive in a dangerous world.

It is, therefore, a matter of concern that although the gatekeepers in our media have recognized the gravity of our economic and security problems, and have exposed them to broad public discussion, they have not yet comprehended how dangerously ill-equipped we are to conduct our international relations. Given the importance of the subject of this conference, I hope it will draw some attention from those same newspapers and television stations which daily communicate to us even the most inane comments on inflation, productivity and the MX missile.

I have spent my adult life in the business of making, executing and explaining American foreign policy. I have, therefore, a vested interest in believing that the United States and its Government are competent to conduct a foreign policy worthy of the name.

In fact, as I prepare to depart the office to which the President appointed me in 1977, I come unhappily but increasingly to the conclusion that the United States is not well equipped to devise or carry out foreign policies commensurate either with our national interests or with our inescapable obligations to both history and the world.

Further, I believe that the evolution of the international environment and of our domestic circumstances is aggravating an already serious weakness.

And, finally, I am profoundly concerned that unless urgent, sustained remedial steps are taken quickly, the consequences will be crippling, perhaps even mortal, for one of history's most important experiments in human liberty and well-being.

A senior public official who speaks so strongly has an obligation to explain what he means and to suggest possible remedies. And when he addresses such statements to representatives of private organizations, he also has the obligation to make it clear that if the private sector is in substantial default on a national trust, so also is the Federal Government. That is to say, I fear that those officially charged with the conduct of this country's foreign policies -- whether they work for the Department of State, the National Security Council at the White House or the Congress -- are inadequately prepared to serve our country. It will be no different in the next Administration than in its predecessors.

That fact, and I believe it to be a fact, should not surprise us. Our public officials, our Foreign Service, are the products of the same historical experiences, the same educational system, the same social environment as other Americans. And in a free and open society such as ours, they will be competent and effective only to the degree that their fellow citizens -- and their elected representatives -- wish them to be.

Let me evoke the dimensions of the problem of competence with a question: why was it that in late 1976 when one had mentioned the name of Cyrus Vance, one had exhausted the list of obviously qualified Democratic candidates for the office of Secretary of State? And why was it that in late 1980, when one had mentioned the names of Henry Kissinger and Alexander Haig one had largely exhausted the list of obviously qualified Republican candidates for the same office? Or, to put the question in more general form, how does it happen that a nation of 226 million people produces such a small and stagnant pool of men and women with the qualifications and experience required for one of our most important public positions?

What's wrong? How do we retrieve ourselves from a situation which must, if we are honest, be described as perilous. Indeed, what do we mean by the word "competence?"

A nation wishing to conduct a competent great-power foreign policy must possess at least five attributes, distributed fairly widely among its citizenry and public officials.

The first requirement for a competent foreign policy is to possess an historical perspective. It is not merely that those who do not recall the past are condemned to repeat it. Knowledge of history provides individuals and nations with a sense for the ebbs and flows of events, reminds them that civilizations (our own included) rise and decline -- and can be extinguished if not tended to -- gives one a sense of identity and purpose, teaches patience and provides object lessons in the value of persistence, (surely not our longest national suit in foreign policy).

Americans are historical illiterates: our education provides us only with anecdotes about our own past and virtually no knowledge of the history of others. Yet we cannot hope to help manage history-in-the-making -- and that ultimately is the purpose of foreign policy -- without a knowledge of history-as-it-was-made.

In more operational terms, one of our debilities is the national failure to understand that positions of strength in foreign policy can be created only by patient effort over time, or that positions of weakness can be repaired only over time. We are addicted to the quick fix, the instant solution. We play midwife to the birth of Zimbabwe, one of the more hopeful experiments in Black Africa with enormous implications for the future of multiracial rule on that continent, then we turn away without giving the new state the assistance it requires to stay afloat -- much less to remain a hopeful harbinger of a future for South Africa.

A more thoughtful knowledge of history would, I believe, improve our tolerance of ambiguity, and ambiguity is the one certainty in foreign affairs. Our inability to tolerate ambiguity drives us to both artificial clarity and artificial consistency. It does so at great cost. No Administration could hope to be fully consistent on so large an issue as human rights; indeed, it was never necessary to be fully consistent. Yet the Great Simplifiers in the media and the bureaucracy quickly gutted one of the few hopeful initiatives in American foreign policy since the Marshall Plan. They did so by converting the inconsistencies of the Carter Administration into evidence of incompetence.

The second such attribute is knowledge: factual and linguistic knowledge. What we readily grant with respect to the law or medicine or business or the military -- that its practitioners must be knowledgeable to be effective -- we have thus far failed to establish with respect to foreign policy.

Our public school systems persist in using 19th century curricula to prepare citizens for the problems of international coping in the vastly more complex world of the 21st century. As our international interests and obligations grow at a rate that is almost geometric, we find that the percentage of colleges and universities requiring even minimal foreign language competence of the "educated" student has declined from 85% in 1915 to 34% in 1966 to 8% in 1980; or, to illustrate the problem in another way, while there are several thousand English-speaking Japanese businessmen in New York City alone, there are less than a hundred Japanese-speaking American businessmen in Tokyo.

Fewer than one in twenty college students takes even one course dealing with foreign peoples or cultures; during the decade ending in 1977, a period when 2 million additional jobs became dependent upon exports, enrollments in college-level language courses declined by 21%. A scant 5% of all the teachers in this country have had any exposure to international studies and training.

The results should not be surprising: a poll reporting that 40% of high school seniors believed Israel to be an Arab nation or another noting that only 33% of all Americans could name any of the member agencies or institutions of the United Nations. Or a lengthy piece in The New York Times two weeks ago on the critical scarcity of language skills in our armed forces and intelligence agencies. The story quoted Congressman Panetta as saying: "There has to be a recognition of this as meeting a very real national security need, as important as development of a new weapon, as important as training a man to fight in hand-to-hand combat."

Yet this is a country in which one of every six manufacturing jobs produces for export and nearly $1 of every $3 of American corporate profits derives from international activities, exports and foreign investments.

The problem does not end at the level of the private citizen. The Department of State assigns such a low priority to the development of skills in the Foreign Service that it provides no training -- none! -- in the art of negotiation. It sets scandalously low language standards for diplomats assigned abroad. One result: only 6 of 60 American diplomats in Iran during the revolutionary year of 1978 were even minimally proficient in the local language, and only two members of the remaining staff were fluent at the time the hostages were taken.

The greatest country in the free world is flying blind at a time when the international environment demands (1) a much greater American capacity to understand at least the major foreign cultures; (2) a significantly reduced tendency to think -- as we do think, we citizens, we reporters, Members of Congress, business people -- in inaccurate, misleading stereotypes; and (3) the blunt bottom-line ability to live by our wits now that we are no longer wealthy enough to overwhelm our foreign problems by throwing dollars at them.

We are a parochial and insular people attempting to devise and conduct what must necessarily be a cosmopolitan and global foreign policy. It is a prescription for long-term trouble, perhaps disaster.

We face a "knowledge gap." Yet we do nothing in response. President Carter established a national Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies. But he was too busy to receive his Commission's report when it was completed, and neither the Administration nor the Congress has acknowledged -- much less taken any action on -- the Commission's recommendations. It has been left to private efforts like the one in which you are engaged to devise a response.

The third requirement for a competent foreign policy is the capacity to define its terms.

I have not been a consistent admirer of Henry Kissinger, but in one matter he is absolutely correct: he is right to say that the questions we ask are even more important than the answers we get. His insight cuts against the American grain. As a people, we are far more concerned with answers -- with results -- than with systematic explorations of problems. We habitually seek the quick fix; "let's get on with it," we urge ourselves.

The results can be as catastrophic in foreign policy as they would be in medicine.

We neglected to ask the important questions about Indochina in the 1960's. We settled instead for quick, simpleminded definitions of both the situation we confronted and the nature of American interests. The result was 50,000 dead, a disorderly retreat from international responsibility, the first surge in debilitating inflation, domestic upheaval, a generation of disaffected and disbelieving young Americans.

In 1980, in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the President of the United States rushed to announce that we were creating a Rapid Deployment Force to protect our interests in the Persian Gulf. Never mind that the force was, and a year later remains, largely fictitious and ineffectual. Grant that some part of the American response should have been military. But grant as well that the singleminded rush to a military "solution" preempted thoughtful analysis of the religious, cultural, social and economic forces at work in the area -- and therefore estopped the development of a comprehensive policy to deal with the non-military problems we face in the area. Never mind: we had "solved" the problem with the creation of the RDF; we could check the Persian Gulf off the pending list and go on to other things.

But notice: the ability to ask the right questions is, in the first instance, a function of knowing what questions to ask. This, in turn, is a function of knowledge. If the country is flying blind, it should not surprise us that we have such difficulty in defining American interests. Too much of policy proceeds from erroneous premises.

Americans carry a double burden of definitional competence. It is as true for us as for any other country that the first purpose of foreign policy is to assure the survival of the nation. It is also true for Americans -- as it is not for most other peoples -- that our power and wealth, and the force of our philosophical principles, impose upon us an inescapable obligation to define a larger, more selfless set of interests. Alone among the free nations, we have both the power and the duty to define the nature of the international order. By what rules will nations play the

game of international politics? How liberal will the international economic system be? To what degree shall the wealthy nations accept an obligation to assist the impoverished?

The only other country with equivalent capacity to determine the response to these questions is the Soviet Union. I do not believe that Americans wish to relinquish the shape of the international order to its brutish hands. Yet if we do not, we are obliged to define where we stand, and then to act in the light of those definitions.

This may be the most difficult of our many obligations, in part because it requires what is essentially a moral stance in a world that is largely amoral, in part because that which is in the general interest of all (or at least most) nations is rarely fully in the interest of any one, our own included. We must, therefore, be willing to acknowledge that some slice of the narrow American interest is being sacrificed for a larger good.

I am concerned that our national competence in this respect is eroding, in part as a result of our general retreat during the 1970's from a sense of international vocation and responsibility, in part because our current economic circumstances tempt us to forget that we remain affluent beyond the dreams of most and with a margin for generosity that few others will ever know. There is, of course, a third reason why we will find it difficult to retain our competence to address the moral questions of the international order: it resides in the recent disinclination to address ourselves rigorously to the question of moral values and standards in our own private and national lives at home.

I had some hope that the successes of the Carter Administration's appeal to human rights (there were failures and inconsistencies, too, to be sure, but the larger record is of success), combined with the regathering of the American psyche reflected in the election on November 4, would set us back on a more constructive international track.

I am not now so hopeful as I was a month ago. If the Ambassador-designate to the United Nations accurately reflects the views of the new Administration, if indeed we find ourselves once again lending aid and comfort to what she calls the "moderately repressive authoritarian governments," then I fear that we will forfeit much of the international moral legitimacy we have recently reclaimed. We will, among other things, find it more difficult credibly to criticize the Soviet Union for such acts as its intervention in Afghanistan.

A fourth requirement for competence is to understand, and to act on the understanding, that policy is more than pronouncements. One does not have a policy until one has (1) defined one's objectives precisely and clearly, and (2) marshalled the resources which will enable one to attain those objectives. We have historically confused rhetoric with policy, whether we were making the world safe for democracy or declaring the moral equivalent of war on our energy deficit.

We are a great power. We have all of a great power's obligations to history. Yet consider the fact that while we propose to spend $190 billion on military defense next year, we spend only $21 billion for all other aspects of our foreign relations -- to run the State Department, our aid programs, the Export-Import

Bank, Peace Corps, information programs, academic exchanges and the like. Yet these are the tools with which to create the positions of strength which will make it unnecessary to fire our missiles.

This past Fall, I was merely one of a number of senior officials who watched in dismay as the Office of Management and Budget decreed that this great country would spend no more than $21 billion for its foreign affairs. The agencies involved argued that an additional $2 billion was the minimum required. The White House turned us down in the name of economy and the fight against inflation, at the same time as it was setting policy objectives beyond the resources available in support.

I do not find it credible that, in a budget exceeding $700 billion, it is impossible to find $2 billion to assure a forward foreign policy stance in this dangerous world. The only word which comes to mind is "scandalous."

Yet there was no constituency in New York or San Francisco or St. Louis, or the Wall Street Journal or the CBS Evening News, for that extra $2 billion.

The final prerequisite for competence is essentially spiritual. We cannot conduct ourselves well in the world if we hold ourselves in contempt, as we have for so much of the past 20 years.

We have made mistakes. We will make more. Some of them will be moral mistakes. But no great power in history has been so consistently selfless in its foreign policy.

This fact should be a matter of national pride.

Yet for reasons which are not altogether clear, many Americans in the 1960's and 1970's concluded that the uses to which our great power were being put were immoral, that the world would be a better place if we were to come home, withdraw. This reaction represents a classic case of the idealist tripping over his own ideals. Since we were not perfect, the argument went, we were not good enough. The "world's policeman" should be withdrawn to the precinct house. We forgot that the best is the enemy of the merely good, and that to do merely good in this brutal world is to do far more for humankind than might otherwise be accomplished.

If there is to be a reasonable, and a reasonably equitable, international order governing the relations between states, it is more likely to be created with our active participation than in our absence. If we cannot recover a sense of gathered and affirmative political community at home, and if we remain unwilling to serve in at least some respects as the world's policeman, then we can be sure that the law of the jungle will prevail. Other, much less benign forces like the Soviet Union will be happy to fill the resulting vacuum.

I have outlined five major prerequisites to an effective great power foreign policy: (1) an historical perspective, (2) knowledge, (3) the capacity to define the right questions as we proceed, (3) an historical perspective, (4) the ability to set precise objectives and marshall the necessary resources, and (5) an affirmative disposition which recognizes that -- while we may never be perfect -- the world is a better place with us than without us.

I have also argued that we are deficient in each of these five respects. What, then, is to be done?

The first thing to be done is to accept that there are no magic solutions, no quick fixes.

Some of the answers are outlined in the recommendations of the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies. The report has not become an active agenda item for the Federal Government, but there is no reason why state and local entities cannot pursue those recommendations -- or develop more effective ones -- on their own. That is, I take it, the reason why this group has convened. More power to you!

But I think we need to go beyond the recommendations in the Commission's report.

I think it is time for a wholesale assault on our educational system. We need substantial changes in the way we educate our teachers, and not just in the field we are discussing today. Put bluntly, I do not believe that teacher training institutions in this country are serving their stated purposes. They are graduating bureaucrats who speak jargon, not individuals educated in the disciplines they are to teach. If parents have the right to expect teachers to be competent in math and English, so they have the right to expect that substantially more than 5% will have been exposed to international studies and training.

We will also have to review the formal requirements established by our public school systems and colleges and universities. Those requirements are deficient with respect to a knowledge of history, foreign civilizations and foreign languages.

With respect both to teacher training programs and school requirements, coalitions such as this are -- or can be, if they wish -- tremendously potent. You have the collective ability to raise these issues for public discussion and you have a point of view to bring to bear. You represent constituencies.

Secondly, the time is overdue for a rigorous review, and perhaps a restructuring, of our institutions for continuing community education. Here the problems are of two kinds.

In the first place, these institutions tend to be made up of, and be responsive to, self-contained elites; the membership of a world affairs council, for example, or the academic patrons of a university center for oriental studies. There has been far too little effort to link institutions of this kind, much less to build larger linkages between them and the business community or the General Federation of Women's Clubs or the League of Women Voters or local politicians with ambitions which may eventually be national. As a general proposition, the "knowledge producers" spend too little time with the "knowledge consumers." Durable, imaginative linkages are required.

In the second place, the "course of studies" in most of the existing community-based institutions, notably including world affairs councils, is non-rigorous, tending to the "rubber chicken" luncheon at which a speaker expounds. What is required are serious efforts to bring individuals from diverse backgrounds,

and therefore with diverse perspectives on any given problem, together for serious and seriously structured courses of reading, discussion (and perhaps related travel). There are models to be drawn from; I visited one in Seattle on Friday.

There are two reasons for thinking in terms of building new organizational coalitions. The first is simply that coalitions do draw communities together; that is an intrinsic good in this badly splintered society. But secondly it also has the benefit of exposing participants to differing points of view from within the community. Nor is it irrelevant that coalitions tend to have greater effective political power than individual organizations.

Thirdly, I think a major effort has to be made with our media. The conventional wisdom among editors and publishers is that foreign news doesn't sell newspapers. That may have been the case, but my present instinct is that Americans are sufficiently concerned about the state of the world that they will consume more foreign news than might have been the case 20 years ago. I think you ought to challenge the management of the local media to poll their readers and viewers; if the results are anything like what they were when a major Seattle paper surveyed its readers' preferences, I think your local editors and publishers will be surprised. A related point, of course, is that it will be important to draw editors, foreign editors, editorial writers and even owners into discussions about foreign affairs. They need greater competence, too, if they are to perform their tasks, but drawing them into the discussion may indirectly encourage them to give greater attention to world affairs in their papers and news programs.

I also think it of great importance that any coalition-building include the churches. They are important institutions in their own right. They have moral perspectives which deserve to be part of the discussion. But they also need to be reminded by association with others in the community that there are other needs and responsibilities as well, and that the purpose of a foreign policy is not to create the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Churchmen and academic intellectuals were, in my view, singularly responsible for the creation ten years ago of the view that America was too evil to be allowed out in the world.

Finally, you will have to lobby. You will have to lobby the local school board, the city council, the state legislature, the Congress, the Department of State -- and many other individuals and institutions. With some you will be arguing for a change in matriculation or graduation requirements; with others for teacher certification requirements; with still others for effective budget support. Nothing will happen without continuing pressure for thoughtful change.

There is much else to be done. If you could accomplish none but these, you will have done a goodly thing.

Your work, your conference, your efforts to build coalitions and to lobby for change are of signal importance to the survivability of our country. You deserve wide respect and encouragement. I wish you well.